

Fabian Tract No. 216

SOCIALISM
AND
FREEDOM

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SOCIALISM

LIBERTY



Socialism and Freedom

I.

NO accusation against Socialism is more common than the taunt that its exponents do not understand the worth of freedom. It is supposed to be a system under which men will lose all trace of individuality. They will, we are warned, be regimented and dragooned by a powerful bureaucracy which will prescribe each item of their daily lives. The Socialist State is depicted as though it were a Platonic Utopia in which the guardians were replaced by the grim henchmen of Lenin and Trotsky. The indictment varies in its emphasis. Sometimes it is against the family that the Socialist appeal is said to be directed; and we are bidden to compare the proud freedom of Laburnum Villa with the relentless organisation of some nationalised phalanstery. Sometimes it is the artist and the thinker who are said to be in peril; for in a state like the Socialist State the absence of a leisured class is held to involve the necessary disappearance of art and philosophy. Nor, we are told, will the adventurer's risk remain; the boy who is engaged as an apprentice in a motor factory can never dream of attaining to the eminence of Mr. Ford. A world reduced to plan and system will lose the colour and variety that are the essence of freedom. We shall lose the marks of separate and identifiable personality. We shall become items in a vast card catalogue, marionettes responsive to the control of others. Socialism, so it is said, involves a world of Robots living by the orders of officials. It is a system from which all chance and vividness have gone; in which no man remains, as now, eager and able to be master of the event.

We are advised, accordingly, to cling to what we have. Here, at the worst, is a world in which each man can control his own fate. The fortune that attends him he makes for himself. No barrier stands in the way of his ascent; and the humble engine driver may find himself the cabinet minister of a great empire. Freedom of conscience, freedom of political belief, an educational system which leaves open the high road to the best training society can offer, the power to share in the making of law, the opportunity, by energy and inventiveness, to attain the eminence of wealth and

position, these, we are told, now lie open to all. The prospects of a democratic society built upon the economics of industrialism represent a solid achievement won only after bitter struggle; and we are asked by Socialists to exchange them for a system under which no man can determine his own destiny. The progress of the world, so it is said, is built upon our present method of removing the shackles which fetter the free play of individuality. Socialism would replace that freedom by rigorous control. It would bring down the dead hand of the State upon the priceless initiative now possessed by the ordinary man. It would foster uniformity at the expense of uniqueness. It would fashion a world in the image of mediocrity. To-day, at least, the career is open to the talents, and the sovereign power of the electorate is an assurance that necessary changes will be effected.

It is not, of course, denied that there are disharmonies in the present order. There is disparity of wealth; but since real wages have increased in the last hundred years we have the assurance that the toiler has a larger claim upon the national dividend. There is grievous unemployment; but a system of social insurance has now mitigated its most serious consequences. Educational opportunity is still unequal; but a ladder is being rapidly built whereby all who can take advantage of it may reach its summit. There are slums and infant mortality, preventable accidents in industry, inequality before the law, a harsh penal system. But the conscience of the nation is awakened. Never was charity more widely organised. Never did the essential unity of classes appear more evident to those of our governors who knew the comradeship of the trenches. The spirit of progress permeates every part of the social fabric; and the keynote of our effort is the right of the individual.

It would be an idyllic picture did it possess the single merit of accuracy. But if it is compared with the facts we know, it shrinks at once into ineptitude. The lives of most are not made by themselves. The clerk, the docker, the shop assistant, the factory hand are driven in each item of their working lives to abide by the behest of other men. They do not share in making the orders under which they live; they are not invigorated by that stimulus to creative effort upon which alone a permanent social order can be built. Most of them fight an unending struggle with poverty, or the penumbra of poverty, in which, almost from the outset, they know they are bound to be defeated. In any sober analysis, the prizes of life are not within their grasp. Materially they are either the possession of men who have never had to do battle for them or have won them by methods often ethically disreputable; intellectually, it is only the rare few who can transcend the limits of an education as mean and narrow as that to which

most are condemned. Spiritually, doubtless, they can share not less than others in the gain of living. The splendour of conviction, the mystery of love, the opportunity to share in a great corporate effort lie open to them. But these do not and cannot lie open to them as a natural part of life. Most trade union leaders have had to pay a heavy price for their inability to accept the principles of capitalism; and few working women can hope to be more than unpaid domestic drudges once the first months of love have passed.

The true goods of life, in fact, security, knowledge, the enjoyment of beauty, only a few in the present social order can hope to know. The rest will live a life of unending routine, uncertain of the morrow, and on the threshold of a great spiritual heritage from entrance to which they are debarred. Their homes are mean and devoid of beauty. Their tastes are debauched by immersion in an atmosphere into which the life of the spirit can rarely hope to penetrate. Even if they have the joy of creating beautiful things, they cannot hope to possess them. Even if beautiful things are at their hand, they have seldom been taught to grasp their secret. They have political power; but they view the drama of politics as a play in which they are cast for the part of spectators. They could have economic power; but they have never been trained either to understand its principles, or the complex institutions through which these work. They are forced by their circumstances to remain private persons, whom only unwonted experience compels to report their wants. Their rulers can involve them in war; and they do not know how to judge its rights and wrongs. They are trained to be the recipients of orders which they obey from dumb inertia.

At the base of society their main desire is to be let alone. If they are the conquered, at least they seek to avoid the icy inquisition of the conqueror. At the summit, their main desire is for notice by that fourth estate which now lives with its ear glued to the keyhole. To be at the right first night; to be painted by the artist of the moment; to have the last celebrity at their receptions; to have read the book which they hear whispered those who know are reading; to divide their time so that in London and Cannes, Luxor and Scotland, they can wear the right clothes at the right moment, and leave other places empty when they are away from them; these are the hypotheses upon which they build their faith. Between base and summit, they are seeking either to avoid the abyss, or, by some superhuman effort, to climb beyond mediocrity into that charmed circle whose portraits are dispensed by the press photographer to the frequenters of doctors' waiting rooms.

The community, as Disraeli saw, is divided into the two nations of rich and poor. The one concerns itself in enjoying life while

there is yet time, and in seeking to postpone that period when the masses will refuse to suffer in peaceful silence. The other lives in half-impotent wonder at the events it knows of its own experience and those of that other species it sees dimly in the distance. Occasionally, indeed, from its wonder is born indignation, and from indignation thought. It may well be that therein is implied a new social order since thought is a disease against which no specific has been yet discovered. But the period of gestation is slow; and the degree of pain in birth is always a measure of its chance of survival.

Two freedoms we must grant to our own time. In the Western world, it is, on the whole, true that religious toleration is reasonably complete. The cynic might say that it is complete because the religious motive has lost its potency in our civilisation. Men may be what they will, from Atheist to Zoroastrian, only because the life of faith, the passionate communion with things unseen, has for the vast majority, lost its magic; and he might add that the main motive in the coming of religious freedom was the conviction, born of hard experience, that intolerance was commercially unprofitable. He might add, even further, that the acceptance of religious creeds is not held to involve the acceptance of the conduct implied in those creeds. A Dean of the Anglican Church need not preach the Sermon on the Mount so long as he does not doubt too openly the Athanasian Creed. A Nonconformist business man may attain eminence in his denomination; but he is not expected to insist that love of one's neighbour is a principle of business organisation.

There is, also, within the ambit of Western Civilisation, probably a wider degree of political freedom than in the past. Men, on the balance, have ampler room for the expression of intellectual conviction. There are even communities in which no penalty attaches to a belief in Socialism, and there are States which have permitted Socialist parties to hold office for a brief space of time. But, Russia apart, it is to be remembered that Socialism has not, so far, been powerful enough to strike at the heart of the capitalist citadel. Where it has been over-emphatic, as in Hungary and Italy, it has suffered appropriate penalty. In America, indeed, the rumour even of what it implies has been sufficient to make its opponents eager to revive every ancient motive of persecution. Yet faith in Socialism does grow, though it must be admitted that the tolerance of its opponents has not yet been put to a serious test. Faith in the power of reason is not the strongest of human impulses; and we shall know more of its tenacity when Socialism begins to move nearer the realisation of its central aim.

Upon one other aspect of freedom under the present order a word may be said. Certainly more amply than at any previous time there exists freedom before the courts of law. But that

freedom is limited and hampered by the conditions of the economic régime. A rich woman who steals from a Kensington shop will not get the same sentence as a poor woman who steals from a Whitechapel shop. What is called embezzlement in a junior clerk is often called high finance in a millionaire. What is called high spirits in an Oxford undergraduate is called assaulting the police in Barking and Limehouse. The divorce law bears unequally upon rich and poor. The average prisoner in the dock is attacked by all the legal ability at the command of the State ; it is only the wealthy criminal who can afford to pit equal talent against it. A London jury is fairly certain to award damages for libel to a Tory Member of Parliament ; but it is also fairly certain to assume that a labour sympathiser cannot be libelled. Our law, as it is administered, consciously reflects the division of the State into rich and poor ; and, unconsciously, the justice it makes assumes a different merit in either part.

For, so the Socialist would emphasise, all freedom is an intimate function of the property-system which obtains at any given time. At present, outside a small minority, no man has anything to sell except his power to labour. That means, for most, that they must work as the owners of capital permit them to work. They must struggle for each item of improvement in the condition of their labour ; and they will find the scales weighted against them in their effort. They will find, for example, that the Press emphasises the wickedness of builders who restrict their output ; but it does not emphasise the wickedness of employers' trusts formed to limit output. They will find that a strike like the miners' strike of 1921 means want and hunger and ill-health for them and their wives ; but it does not alter one jot or tittle the habits of royalty-owners like the Duke of Northumberland. Long hours of labour at a mechanical routine ; an education which ends just as the problems of knowledge begin to exert their fascination ; the possibility of dismissal through the caprice or incapacity of the employer ; a wage that can rarely mean release from material want at any standard of national adequacy ; a knowledge that ill-health or early death means ruin to the family he supports ; these are the normal items in the life of the average worker. Upon these things, the system of individual liberty bases its foundations. For the worker, let it be noted again, the compensation is the knowledge, first, that there are prizes to be won, even if he does not win them, and, second, that even the division of the product of industry in terms of a rigorous equality would not make an overwhelming difference to his position. He is bidden further to remember that so nice is the equipoise of the system that any sudden dislocation of the machinery may destroy even its power to satisfy such wants as it now meets. Its adjustment is so delicate that catastrophe would follow upon any revolt against its inequities.

It is from some such analysis as this that Socialists derive their scepticism of the freedom effected by the present order ; and their doubt is intensified by the complete absence of moral principle in the methods by which the division of the State into rich and poor is maintained. For either wealth is the result of inheritance, as from parent to child, or luck ; or it is the result of the power to satisfy demand. But the first has no moral basis ; I am not entitled to the profits of someone else's exertions. The second takes no account of the moral or even social character of demand. There is no necessary relation between the demands which ought to be satisfied and the demands which have the power to secure satisfaction. For the power to secure satisfaction in its turn depends upon the possession of property ; and since freedom means the power to satisfy demands, freedom is a function of property. The scales are therefore weighted in favour of the rich against the poor. The system organises response to demand without regard to human need. It regards wants as significant only at that level where they come armed with purchasing power. Freedom, therefore, in an essential way, is limited to the owners of property. That is why there is one law for the rich and one law for the poor ; that is why, also, the education of the poor trains them to habits of deference, and the education of the rich trains them to habits of command. To speak, therefore, of the present order as one built upon freedom is to regard the interest of the few who can achieve it as coincident with the general well-being of society.

II.

The Socialist approaches the problem of freedom from a different angle. The purpose of society, he argues, is to enable each man to be himself at his best. Freedom is the system of conditions which makes that purpose effectively possible. Those conditions define themselves out of the historic record. They are impossible in the presence of special privilege, whether political, or religious, or economic. They are impossible unless I can report fully to those who govern what my experience of life is doing to me. They are impossible also unless my education has been of such a kind as to enable me to make articulate the meaning of my experience. They are impossible, further, unless I am safeguarded against the pressure of material want. I must have a wage that gives me a reasonable standard of life. I must work each day only that number of hours which will leave opportunity for creative leisure. And, in the hours of work, I must live under conditions which I assist in making. I must have the sense that they are intelligible in the same way that the orders of a medical man or a sanitary engineer are intelligible ; they must be referable, that is to say, to principles which can be established as rational by scientific investigation. I must

feel that the State recognises my equal claim with others, in the things essential to the good life ; and that no one is admitted to an equal claim save as he pays for it by personal service. There must be equality in these essential things for all before there is superfluity for any ; and the differences that exist between the rewards of men must be differences that do not weight the scales unduly in favour of those above the minimum level.

It is the Socialist case that without these things there cannot be freedom. Broadly, they imply equality ; and their argument is that freedom and equality are inseparable. It is insisted, further, that in an individualist régime like the present anything in the nature of equality is unattainable. For those who own in any society the essential instruments of production are able, in the nature of things, to affect the emphasis of social good towards themselves. It is their view of what is right that prevails ; and their view of what is right will, in general, coincide with a policy which makes their own interest the index to what ought to be done. It therefore becomes necessary to socialise the ownership of the essential means of production ; and, both within that sphere and without it, so to modify the law of testamentary disposition that no one can acquire, by the efforts of another, a claim upon the national dividend without service proportionate to his reward. The Socialist does not dogmatise as to the forms such social ownership should take. All that he insists is that until they are effectively the possession of the community, they cannot be fully administered in the interest of the community. That means such administration as will realise the system of conditions we call freedom.

It is difficult to see any necessary antithesis between the theory so stated and the freedom at which the individual aims. He would, as now, marry and beget children ; he would, as now, enjoy entire freedom of religious belief. He would be certain, as he is not now certain, that his children would be trained to an understanding of life. He would be released from the fear that now haunts him of unemployment or of indigence. The rules of industrial life under which he had to live, would be rules in the making of which he had a right to share. Where he laboured in a socialised industry, the position he could win would depend, not upon nepotism, or caprice, or the ability to take advantage of his fellows, but in the capacity he showed for service. Where he laboured in an industry still left in private hands, the standards by which he was safeguarded would be far higher than they can possibly be in a system of which the profit of the employer is the predominating motive. Every political liberty he now enjoys he would possess in far wider measure than is now possible. He could get elected as now ; he could attain office with the greater opportunity, since the prestige of birth and wealth would be removed. If he chose, as most men

would choose, to stand apart from an active political life, the process would be intelligible to him. He would be a significant part of it because he could, equally with other persons, hope to press upon it the impact of his experience. He could live, as now, enfolded within the margins of his little platoon; but he would have the sense, and he would be trained to act upon the sense, that his platoon was part of the great regiment of mankind.

It is said that such a régime is impossible for two reasons. It would need, in the first place, immensely greater productivity than now; and it would require a skill in management which is invariably absent from socialised enterprise. The ability to win profit, so it is argued, is the one sure motive to successful business enterprise; and once that adventurer's risk is stifled there is sure to be inertia and waste. But the first argument, so far from being a difficulty in the way of Socialism, is, in fact, one of the chief reasons for its adoption. The proofs accumulate that we cannot win either from worker or employer the best that he can give, under the present system. The heart of the first denies his allegiance to it; and the employer, by the very conditions of the system, is either driven to combination which limits output, or is not in a position adequately to grasp the nature of demand. The network of trade union regulations limiting output are the necessary consequence of capitalism; and they will disappear only with the establishment of that system of conditions we have called freedom. Under Socialism the motives to production are far stronger than they are now. The worker is assured of security. He is safeguarded against unfairness in the distribution of the product. He is assured that the standards upon which he depends constitute the first charge on the social income. He is freed, that is to say, from that balked disposition which is to-day the real barrier against his effort. He becomes part of an order to which he can give a reasoned allegiance because it is no longer instinct with injustice.

Nor is there any reason to assume that collectivist enterprise is uninventive and wasteful. Municipal effort, in electricity for example, compares more than favourably with private effort; and perhaps the most dramatic industrial adventure of the nineteenth century has been that co-operative movement from which the concept of private profit has been eliminated. Nor, it should be insisted, does the socialisation of industry mean that it will be organised on some simple and uniform pattern. Most Socialists demand two things only. They insist, in the first place, that in the essential industries—banking, electric power, coal and railway transport—the only possible source of ownership, granted the claim of the public, is the community; and they insist, in the second place, that the constitution assumed by the government of socialised

industries shall leave ample room for the individual worker to feel himself a creative unit in its operation. They do not dogmatise about the form such constitutions should take, since they are aware that the needs of each industry are different. They do not, either, dogmatise about the range over which socialisation shall extend; they admit freely that this is a matter for enquiry and experiment. All that they demand is that when an industry is regarded as so fundamental to the community as no longer to be fit for the hazards of private enterprise, it shall not remain a source of private profit to the owner of capital, and that it shall maximise the creative ability of its working personnel.

It is not a serious argument against the socialisation of essential industries that particular experiments in public ownership have failed. Particular experiments in private ownership fail every day, but the supporters of an individualist system do not urge their failure as a conclusive argument against capitalism. Every defect in the working of public ownership can be paralleled from the working of private enterprise. Every merit in private enterprise has been displayed in the operation of public-owned industries. And no one who knows the history, for example, of the British civil service, can doubt that the opportunity to serve the State is a motive to effort every whit as compelling as the motive to win profit for oneself. The argument that socialised industries would be stifled by their own red tape is merely a gibe, and, at that, an ignorant gibe, taken over from a misunderstanding of the requirements of a modern department of State. Let a business man find a single error in the calculations of the Board of Inland Revenue, and he pants to start a correspondence in the *Times*; but the same man takes it as a matter of course that there should be mistakes in the monthly accounts that he receives from one of those vast emporia the growth of which the modern business man takes as the proof of progress. Most, indeed, of the accusations of bureaucracy brought against public ownership are the crude type of propaganda which seeks to postpone its inevitable victory.

III.

Nor is there the slightest reason to suppose that under a Socialist State art and science cannot flourish. If they receive patronage to-day, when only a minority can appreciate them, how much more secure is likely to be their foothold when understanding of their significance is open to the community as a whole? The artist to-day is, hardly less than the worker, the prisoner of the property system. The dealer, the patron, the critic are all affected towards him by his willingness to subordinate himself to the conventions of the time. If, like Byron and Shelley, he finds those

conventions outrageous, he is driven into exile; if, like William Morris and Bernard Shaw, he devotes himself to their destruction, it is assumed without discussion that this is merely the madness of the artist. The capitalist state selects for its approval the artist and the thinker who either accept its philosophy or refuse to concern themselves with right and wrong. But in a world where our views of right and wrong either make or destroy freedom the artist and the thinker who are true to themselves can hardly do otherwise than protest against a view of life which makes gain instead of service the main motive of effort. Commercialism has destroyed the true liberty of the individual, by making him the captive of a social philosophy which declares that he is important not for what he is, but for what he has. There can be no true opportunity for the artist in such an atmosphere. He is watching the depression of personality, where his real mission is to secure its release. But in a world where living itself becomes an art, the enormous importance of the artist and the thinker will become apparent. They will cease to be regarded as decorative appurtenances of the leisured class. They will be recognised as the true leaders of civilisation. The system will not dictate to them the things they should say and the forms they should use, as it does now. Their perceptions and their insight will be their own; and men will have learned to recognise that in the appreciation of their gifts lies the most joyous experience life can offer.

Implied in all this, of course, is the insistence that the true Socialism is a libertarian, and not an authoritarian, socialism. That is, I think, generally agreed among Socialists. Realising as they do more keenly than other people the slavery to which most people are now condemned, they do not propose to remedy its defects by ensuring the slavery of all. They realise that the rules made must be rules to which the average man has consented. They understand that the solutions accepted are solutions that arise naturally out of his experience of life. The record of history is before them to show that laws made by compulsion never win the free assent of men, and that in the end they work only as the allegiance given to them is willing and uncoerced. They do not believe that a social order as vast as our own can be maintained without discipline and plan; freedom, for them, does not mean doing as one likes. But they do believe that the discipline ordained can be made instinct with justice and that it can, accordingly, win the intelligent, and even passionate, allegiance of erect-minded men. They do not suggest that freedom and nonconformity are synonymous. But they do insist that there can be no freedom until those things about which conformity is demanded have been established only with the common assent of the community.

It is only by freeing ourselves from the tyranny of things that we can enter into our real heritage. That freedom is impossible so long as the division of property is not referable to principles of justice. The absence of these principles under the present system poisons every relation into which we enter. It means that the many are the slaves of the few. It leads some to be angry and sullen rebels. It leaves others little more than dumb animals to whom life is a spectacle without meaning. Others, again, are led by crude convention to waste their effort in producing or enjoying the worthless and insignificant. Fear and hate haunt the margins of our civilisation as prospects instinct with disaster. In such an atmosphere freedom has no hope of entrance. For freedom cannot live where there is injustice, since it can flourish only where the souls of men are regarded as of a worth too eminent to be degraded by a mean struggle for bread. A system like our own which leaves men to fight their neighbours for what they can grab from them cannot produce the qualities which give joy to life. It means eternal war between classes and external war between nations. It means law as a code of wrongs, instead of law as a code of rights. The qualities that give their humanity to men emerge rather as protest than as nature. Aspiration towards the heights is destroyed by the scramble to snatch the chance advantage where, for a brief moment, we can breathe an atmosphere of peace. But it is for a brief moment only. For the millionaire has the pauper at his door. In the midst of his plenty there penetrates to him the angry murmur, from Russia and India, from America and France, and England, of men who are embittered by the sense of deprivation. We cannot, whatever our riches, be free save as we seek to be just.

"I feel sure," wrote William Morris,* in perhaps the noblest of his lectures, "I feel sure that the time will come when people will find it difficult to believe that a rich community such as ours, having such command over external Nature, could have submitted to live such a mean, shabby, dirty life as we do." But this, it is said, is all Utopian; it forgets the ignobility of human nature. It makes abstraction of the ignorance of men, their laziness, their brutality. It is to expect from them an effort and a quality of effort that they have neither the endurance nor the capacity to undertake.

That is the kind of pessimism that has always been an essential part of the tactic of reaction. We have to build our philosophy on hopes and not on fears. We have to lay the foundations of our systems on what the courage of men has achieved, not on what their cowardice has failed in achieving. Almost every progressive change has met opposition on the ground of its impossibility; and every progressive change has been achieved because a handful of

* "How we live and how we might live," in *Signs of Change*, p. 29.

idealists have refused to admit it was impossible. The real sin in social philosophy is lowness of aim. We need not cry for the sun, but, at least equally, we need not deny the possibility of light. Men, whether they will or no, are members of a commonwealth which can be preserved only as they discover the reality of fellowship. They will discover it only as they seek to experiment with the best of themselves. But, so to experiment, we need to be members of a State to which the allegiance of men is given with a passion at once vivid and intelligent, and, to that end, it must be a State conceived in justice. For justice is the twin-sister of freedom and each lives in the victory of the other.

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25 TOTHILL STREET, WESTMINSTER, LONDON, S.W. 1.

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(TO BE SIGNED BY ALL MEMBERS.)

(Adopted May 23rd, 1919.)

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